

Another view: Wasted billions

Congress' obsession with earmarks mars oversight of federal spending.

By Jeff Flake

Members of Congress often say that outside critics spend too much time complaining about earmarks. After all, these congressionally directed appropriations represent only a fraction of the federal budget.

Take it from somebody on the inside. If you think that critics spend an inordinate amount of time and resources talking about earmarks, you should see the time and effort members of Congress spend securing earmarks.

The House Appropriations Committee has the task of deciding how much money should go to each federal program — which programs should be cut and which should receive additional funding. This is an awesome responsibility requiring considerable oversight. But in the past several years, the committee hasn't had the time or resources to do much other than process earmark requests. Last year, the committee got more than 30,000 earmark requests. Ultimately, nearly 12,000 of these were funded.

If you're thinking that the Appropriations Committee can't possibly deal with so many earmark requests and still provide the necessary oversight of federal spending, you're right. It hasn't. In the past several years, Congress has essentially given the administration a free pass to spend the taxpayers' money. Billions of dollars are wasted every year by federal agencies, with little comment, let alone action, by Congress.

One would think that having a Democratic Congress would mean additional oversight on domestic spending decisions made by a Republican administration — oversight that was sorely lacking when Republicans controlled Congress. This hasn't been the case.

There seems to be an unspoken truce between Congress and the administration: You don't complain about our earmarks, and we won't cut your budget. If you ignore our earmark for a teapot museum in North Carolina, we'll keep quiet about the Department of Homeland Security's grant for bingo halls in Kentucky.

[Article I of the Constitution](#) gives Congress power over the entire federal budget. Yet we've squandered this birthright for a meager bowl of porridge — the ability to earmark just a fraction of that budget.

Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., has sponsored legislation to reform the earmark process.

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